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ABSTRACT

Three conclusions were drawn about within-class grouping after reviewing the work of several researchers on the following topics: teacher and student behavior, academic achievement, perceptions about reading groups, social class membership and reading group assignment, and the role of group cohesiveness. The conclusions were that: (1) although the evidence is far from conclusive, justification can be found both for grouping or for not grouping (whole class instruction); (2) when instructional reading level conditions are met, no reliable and/or significant differences are found for grouping over whole-class instruction; and (3) the low reading group has numerous psychological and social strikes against it, but there is no strong evidence that these decrease or limit the reading achievement of the group members. A few educators argue that grouping is not strictly a school matter but that it contributes to an undesirable caste system within American society. (Twenty references are attached.) (MG)

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THE DILEMMA OF WITHIN-CLASS GROUPING

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What Happens When We Group for Reading Instruction?

Hiebert's review in Reading Research Quarterly (1983) showed that social as well as educational forces operate in intraclass grouping. She summarized how pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil interactions were frequently different for the low reading group than for the high reading group. Some differences were: Amount of time, kinds of tasks/learnings, oral or silent reading, post-reading discussion, and pupils' perception about self. Many of these ideas were also described in Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985).

This review deals with some research conducted since then but also deals with some not previously reviewed systematically or incorporated into the literature.

Teacher and Student Behavior

Even though teacher-student interaction may be different from reading group to reading group, this may not necessarily be undesirable or educationally unsound. Haskins, Walden, & Ramey (1983) observed high and low reading groups in 19 kindergarten, K-1, and first-grade classrooms. They followed these observations with interviews. There were some differences in teacher and student behavior between the high and low reading groups: (1) teachers used more drill, more error correction, more control statement, and more positive reinforcement with low-group students; (2) low-group students received more direct instructions; and (3) low-group students were more disruptive and more often off-task than high-group students.

They concluded that the instructional setting and techniques teachers used with low-ability students were well-suited to the intellectual and behavioral characteristics of these students. This is something Hiebert (see above) did not address but which seems fundamentally relevant.

A basic yet unstated and unexamined assumption in much research is that "a low reading group equal a low reading group equals a low reading group." Another is

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that reading groups are formed on the basis of reading achievement.

Haller and Waterman (1985) interviewed 60 4th, 5th and 6th grade teachers as to the criteria they used in forming reading groups. Teachers used reading ability only 33 percent of the time while criteria such as behavior/personality, general academic competence, work habits, and home background were considered the rest of the time.

Barr and Sadow (1989) analyzed the reading groups of seven teachers and found that groups often overlapped markedly in terms of reading achievement; seldom were they dichotomous on this basis. Barr and Sadow didn't determine the bases on which the teachers assigned students to reading groups but it is obvious the teachers used factors other than the student's reading achievement as measured by a standardized test. The overlap among many groups was so great that it seems reading achievement was only one factor considered in assigning students to groups.

The point is that we don't have an unequivocal, accepted or operational definition at the "low reading group." It is obvious the low group needn't be composed of only the poorest readers in the room. One teacher's low group may differ drastically from another teacher's low group. Research that fails to consider these factors could produce ambiguous, confusing, or even invalid data and conclusions. This may be particularly true at certain kinds of comparative research.

Academic Achievement

Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) tested 37 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th classes at the beginning and the end of the school year and had usable data on 384 "grouped" students and 180 "ungrouped" ones. Even though they found some advantages to small homogeneous groups on some criteria, they found no evidence that grouping helps with reading achievement.

This is very puzzling in some ways because of the faith reading authorities have placed in the concept of the Instructional Reading Level. A first assumption one might make is that reading groups would be placed in different levels of instructional materials. (Or else

why group?) And if this were the case, surely more students would be reading at or near their Instructional Level than would be the case in whole-class situations where all students were reading from one text. The closer to the Instructional Level, the greater the reading achievement. Hypothetically.

Possibly, research that doesn't look carefully at the instructional materials used by different groups could be so flawed as to be unreliable.

Perceptions about Reading Groups

Pre- and in-service teachers. Schell and Rouch (1988) used a semantic differential scale and found that student teachers and teachers with one-two years experience had a negative perception of the low reading group compared to the high reading group. But as a group, those with three or more years of experience had a balanced, unbiased perception even though some individuals within this category has distinct negative perceptions of the low reading group.

Elementary school pupils. Schell (1989) surveyed pupils in grades one through six on their perception of good and poor readers and found a significant, consistent, and uniformly negative perception of poor readers at all grade levels, 1-6. Poor readers and members of the low reading group are viewed by both teachers and children as possessing negative personality and behavior traits while good readers and members of the high reading group are perceived far more positively.

Filby and Barnett (1982) interviewed 102 pupils from two second grade and two fifth grade classrooms as to who was the better reader and why. One classroom at each grade level was taught reading via whole class instruction while the other was in permanently ability-based reading groups. Both the second and fifth grade whole class pupils agreed on who the better readers were because they had opportunities to hear all members of the class read orally. Members of grouped classes showed less agreement as to who the better readers were. The authors speculated that low ability students had a more positive self-concept in grouped classes than in whole class because there was less evidence of a hierarchy.

Marshall and Weinstein (1984) developed a model about factors affecting students' self-evaluation. They concluded that not all social comparisons have negative results. Only in competitive situations and in environments where students are judged along a single ability continuum will social comparisons likely have a negative effect. This is similar to Filby and Barnett's speculation above. Furthermore, Marshall and Weinstein believe that under certain circumstances, social comparisons may not have negative consequences for low achievers. They believe modification of the situation/condition can lead to positive self-evaluation rather than a negative one.

Social Class Membership and Reading Group Assignment

Shannon (1985) reviewed research and argues compellingly that pupils from lower socioeconomic classes end up in low achievement groups. And this contributes to and perpetuates social stratification. He maintains that reading group membership is associated with other status characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Grant and Rothberg (1986) in a study of eight 1st and 2nd grade classrooms ability-grouped for reading instruction supported Shannon's contention to some degree. They state that their findings suggest that "intentionally or not, reading groups create and perpetuate status distinctions among students" and that "these distinctions become increasingly difficult to counter as the student's education progresses." They conclude that the ability groups seemingly contribute to the maintenance of status distinctions from generation to generation.

They even sharply question whether certain strategies can be introduced in classrooms to minimize negative effects of grouping forms, cooperative learning strategies, frequent reformulation of groups, equal instruction time, etc. will change things.

Slavin (1988) in a review of research states that within-class grouping is definitely effective for improving achievement in elementary school math but questionable for doing the same in elementary school reading. He echoes some of Grant and Rothberg's contention by saying, "Yet virtually every means of grouping students by ability or performance level has drawbacks that may

be serious enough to offset any advantages....Grouping may doom children who are not in the top tracks to second class instruction and, ultimately, second-class futures."

Some educators have broadened the criteria by which reading groups can be evaluated; they have added sociological dimensions other than affective factors such as self-concepts. In essence, they have pushed the topic nearly to--or possible even into--the political spectrum.

The role of Group Cohesiveness

Most groups formed for reading instruction aren't really groups as defined by social psychologists; they're more nearly like passengers on a bus. One aspect of real groups is their cohesiveness which is intermember or interpersonal attraction. This aspect seems not well considered in other reviews of research but seems to have the potential for positive contributions.

McGinley and McGinley (1970) found that late in the year, for working situations, 1st graders in the low reading group made more than expected choices from the top reading group and fewer from their own group. I.e., pupils in the low reading group didn't particularly want to work with others in their reading group. Members of the high-reading group, on the other hand, definitely wanted to work with members of their own group and not with members of the middle or low group. The high group had more cohesiveness than did the low group.

Zeichner (1978), as a result of a study on 621 5th and 6th graders, concluded:

1. One's perceived acceptance in the classroom peer group seems to be a critical factor for reading achievement, and

2. The absence of a feeling of security in one's peer group seems detrimental to emotional health and to task performance in the classroom.

Lott and Lott (1966) studied the effect of high and low cohesive groups on the learning of Spanish equivalents of English words by 4th and 5th graders. They found

that the high IQ children in the high cohesive groups consistently did better on this task than did high IQ children in low cohesive groups. However, group cohesiveness made no difference for low IQ children; they learned about the same no matter how cohesive the group.

Walberg (1976) in a review of research on the topic concluded:

1. The more cohesive a group is perceived, the greater the group learning, and

2. The greater the group cohesiveness, the greater the group learning.

Alexander and Filler (1974) reviewed literature and research on the topic and suggested 10 implications for teachers who want to group for reading instruction. Regrettably, we have no research as how to create cohesiveness in reading groups nor whether such cohesiveness--if created--could produce any desired positive effects.

The cooperative learning procedures of Slavin (1987), and Johnson and Johnson (1985) has possibilities. But it seems inappropriate for day-to-day use with within-class reading groups. Additionally, even though in some circumstances it may produce higher achievement, there is no evidence that it necessarily produces more cohesive groups. There may be simpler ways to create group cohesiveness.

Creating group cohesiveness within the low reading group seems to hold definite positive possibilities--and has for 10-15 years--yet it remains generally unexplored, even omitted from major reviews of the effects of grouping for reading. It seems practical, possibly easy to implement--particularly by building on cooperative learning--and maybe effective. It deserves to be researched.

Conclusions

1. Justification either for grouping or for not grouping (whole class instruction) can be found. The evidence seems to favor no difference yet is really far from conclusive. And, if Slavin (1988) is believed, it may be impos-

sible to ascertain because reading isn't something that is learned and/or practiced only in schools as is mathematics. Thus, research can't meet certain conditions to reach a conclusive answer.

2. Some things are puzzling, nevertheless. Reading authorities nearly unanimously believe strongly in the value (sacredness?) of the Instructional Reading Level. Yet, when conditions seem to be such that this is more nearly met--when pupils are grouped for reading instruction and differential material and instruction are provided, no reliable and/or significant differences are found over whole-class instruction.

3. The low reading group has numerous psychological and social "strikes" against it. But there's no strong evidence that these decrease or limit the reading achievement of group members! Yes, teachers do behave/interact differently toward members of the low reading group than they do toward members of the high and middle group. Yet this behavior--in and of itself--hasn't been shown to reduce or impede reading achievement. Every bit of this research has been descriptive or correlational, not causal.

A few educators are arguing that the consequences of grouping go far beyond school learning and even factors such as self-concept to fundamental sociopolitical concerns. They say grouping is not strictly a school matter but that it contributes to an undesirable "caste" system within American society.

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